

## Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 032976

EXDIS TOSEC 164

FOLLOWING REPEAT MOSCOW 1958 ACTION SECSTATE BELGRADE  
BERLIN USBERLIN BONN BUCHAREST BUDAPEST GENEVA HONG KONG  
LENINGRAD LONDON MUNICH NATO PARIS PEKING  
PRAGUE ROME SOFIA TAIPEI TOKYO USUN VIENNA  
WARSAW DTD 12 FEB

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 1958

EXDIS

E. O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, UR

SUBJ: FURTHER THOUGHTS ON BREZHNEV'S FUTURE

DEPT PLEASE PASS SECRETARY

GENEVA FOR USDEL CSCE

REF: MOSCOW 1127

1. SUMMARY: WHETHER OR NOT BREZHNEV RE-EMERGES DURING PRIME  
MINISTER WILSON'S VISIT, HE CANNOT PUT OFF FUNDAMENTAL DECISIONS  
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ABOUT HIS FUTURE MUCH LONGER AND THE QUESTION OF HIS EVENTUAL  
SUCCESSION MUST BE PARAMOUNT IN THE MINDS OF ALL HIS COLLEAGUES.  
A SERIES OF INTERNATIONAL EVENTS - VE DAY, THE WARSAW PACT'S  
20TH ANNIVERSARY, A U.S.-SOVIET SUMMIT, THE CSCE THIRD STAGE,

AND A EUROPEAN CP CONFERENCE -- BEGINS IN MAY; ALL OF THESE WOULD ORDINARILY REQUIRE BREZHNEV'S PRESENCE. MOREOVER, PREPARATIONS FOR THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS WILL MEAN THAT AT LEAST PRELIMINARY INTERNAL POLITICAL JOCKEYING SHOULD BE COMPLETED BY MID-YEAR. IN HIS EFFORT TO ASSURE HIS PLACE IN HISTORY, BREZHNEV WOULD SEEM TO HAVE THREE BASIC OPTIONS, ALL OF THEM WITH SERIOUS DRAWBACKS FROM HIS OWN POINT OF VIEW: (1) TO MAKE NO PLANS FOR HIS SUCCESSION AND HANG ON AS LONG AS HE CAN; (2) TO RETIRE IN FAVOR OF A COLLECTIVITY OF SENIORS, WITH KIRILENKO AS HIS DIRECT SUCCESSOR AS PARTY FIRST SECRETARY; AND (3) TO LIMIT HIS FUNCTIONS AND CONCENTRATE ON THE PARTY CONGRESS AND PERHAPS ON GROOMING A YOUNGER SUCCESSOR.

2. BREZHNEV'S ILLNESS IS IN ANY CASE LIKELY TO INTENSIFY THE POLITICAL SPARRING THAT COULD BE EXPECTED TO ACCOMPANY A PRE-PARTY CONGRESS YEAR. WE HAVE SEEN ALMOST NO OVERT SIGN THAT THIS PROCESS, IF IT HAS BEGUN AT ALL, IS AS YET EXPRESSING ITSELF IN POLICY TERMS. OUR TENTATIVE CONCLUSION AT THIS POINT IS THAT, HOWEVER THE SUCCESSION STRUGGLE DEVELOPS, IT IS NOT LIKELY THIS YEAR TO AFFECT THE OVERALL SOVIET COMMITMENT TO DETENTE. WE CONTINUE TO FEEL THAT THE DANGERS FOR THE U.S. ARE RATHER THAT SUCCESSION PROBLEMS COULD AFFECT THE DEGREE OF DETERMINATION AND ENERGY WITH WHICH THE REGIME PURSUES DETENTE AND THUS COULD MAKE IT PROGRESSIVELY LESS CAPABLE OF THE HARD DECISIONS THAT MAY BE NECESSARY TO KEEP UP THE MOMENTUM OF IMPROVING BILATERAL RELATIONS. END SUMMARY.

3. DESPITE EARLIER ASSURANCES FROM SOVIET AND OTHER SOURCES THAT BREZHNEV IS ON THE MEND, HE HAS NOT YET APPEARED PUBLICLY, AND WE CONTINUE TO HEAR VARIOUS REPORTS AND RUMORS THAT HE IS SUFFERING FROM A DISEASE WHICH IS SEVERE ENOUGH TO LIMIT HIS CAPACITIES IN THE FUTURE. HIS APPEARANCE IN GOOD FORM FOR PRIME MINISTER WILSON, WHO ARRIVES THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13, WOULD REDUCE BUT NOT END SPECULATION ABOUT HIS FUTURE. HIS NON-APPEARANCE DURING WILSON'S STAY WOULD, OF COURSE, DRIVE THAT SPECULATION TONELIGHTS.

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4. A SERIES OF EVENTS SCHEDULED FOR 1975 WILL CALL FOR TOP-LEVEL SOVIET LEADERSHIP PARTICIPATION. ON THE EXTERNAL SIDE ALONE, THE CALENDAR INCLUDES CELEBRATIONS OF THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF VE DAY, THE WARSAW PACT 20TH ANNIVERSARY, A SOVIET-AMERICAN SUMMIT, A SUMMIT UPON CONCLUSION OF CSCE, AND A MEETING OF EUROPEAN COMMUNIST PARTIES. IN ORDINARY TIMES ALL OF THESE EVENTS WOULD CALL FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF BREZHNEV PERSONALLY.

5. EVEN MORE IMPORTANT FOR BREZHNEV'S POSITION IN THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP, PREPARATIONS FOR THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS MUST BEING SOON. IF PAST PERFORMANCE IS ANY GUIDE, THERE WILL BE A SERIES OF DOMESTIC SPEECHES BEGINNING AROUND THE MIDDLE OF THIS YEAR AND LEADING UP TO THE QUADRENNIAL ELECTIONS OF UNION-REPUBLIC

SUPREME SOVIETS. THEY CYCLE OF PARTY ELECTIONS WHICH CULMINATES IN THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS SHOULD BEGIN IN THE FALL. IF THE CONGRESS IS NOT TO BE POSTPONED BEYOND ITS STATUTORY DEADLINE OF APRIL 1976, THE PRELIMINARY POLITICAL JOCKEYING SHOULD BE LINED UP IN A MANNER SATISFACTORY TO THE POLITBURO MAJORITY BY MID-YEAR. TO KEEP TO THIS TIMETABLE, THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP MUST THEREFORE APPROACH FUNDAMENTAL DECISIONS ON BREZHNEV'S FUTURE IMMEDIATELY AND ADAPT DECISIONS VERY SOON IF ANY IMPORTANT CHANGES ARE TO BE MADE. THE HIERARCHICAL ELECTIONS FROM BOTTOM TO TOP OF THE CPSU, WILL PROBABLY NOT BE INITIATED UNTIL THE PROBABLE OUTCOME OF POLITICAL SUCCESSION IS CLEAR AND ACCEPTABLE. ELECTIONS BEFORE A PARTY CONGRESS TAKE A MINIMUM OF SIX MONTHS, AND THE PROCESS SHOULD GET UNDERWAY IN SEPTEMBER 1975, SHORTLY AFTER THE END OF THE JULY-AUGUST LEADERSHIP VACATIONS. THE LEADERSHIP WILL ENGAGE IN A SERIES OF STUMPING SPEECHES FOR RSFSR AND REPUBLIC SUPREME SOVIET ELECTIONS BY MID-YEAR, JUST AS IT DID IN 1974 FOR THE USSR SUPREME SOVIET. FACED WITH A MID-SUMMER LEGISLATIVE SESSION COMING PERHAPS IN JULY, THE LEADERSHIP WILL FIND ITSELF COPING WITH SEVERAL DEMANDS ON ITS TIME AND ENERGY, NOT LEAST OF WHICH WILL BE THE SOVIET-AMERICAN SUMMIT.

6. BREZHNEV HIMSELF MUST HAVE THESE TEMPORAL CONSIDERATIONS VERY MUCH IN MIND. WE ASSUME THAT HIS GROWING PREOCCUPATION, AS THE DAYS DWINDLE, IS TO GUARANTEE HIMSELF AN HONORED PLACE IN SOVIET HISTORY -- TO ENSURE THAT, UNLIKE ALL HIS PREDECESSORS EXCEPT LENIN, EVEN AFTER HIS RETIREMENT OR DEATH, HE WILL REMAIN LEONID ILYICH AND NOT BECOME LEONID WHO. IT SEEMS TO US THAT HE HAS THREE, AND POSSIBLE ONLY THREE, GENERAL OPTIONS.  
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A. FIRST, THE IMMORTALITY OPTION: BREZHNEV ACTS AS IF HE WILL NEVER DIE, MAKES NO PLANS FOR HIS SUCCESSION, AND HANGS ON TO AS MUCH POWER AS HE CAN. THIS IS THE OPTION MOST FAVORED BY AGING DICTATORS THROUGHOUT HISTORY. IT IS THE MOST SEDUCTIVE OPTION, BECAUSE IT INVOLVES NO DECISION TO CHANGE THE STATUS QUO AND NO MANEUVERING WITHIN THE PARTY; IN FACT, IT REQUIRES NO CHOICE AT ALL. IT ALSO WOULD SIT BEST WITH BREZHNEV'S COLLEAGUES AND WOULD BE MOST COMPATIBLE WITH HIS OWN PENCHANT FOR CAUTION AND CONSENSUS. ON THE OTHER HAND, BREZHNEV WOULD PROBABLY NOT BE ABLE TO EXERCISE THIS OPTION FOR LONG UNLESS HE REMAINED NEAR THE PEAK OF HIS HEALTH AND ENERGY. IF HIS ENERGIES BEGAN TO FAIL APPRECIABLY, HE WOULD BE VULNERABLE TO HAVING PERSONNEL AND POLICY DECISIONS TAKEN OUT OF HIS HANDS. MOREOVER, AS LONG AS HE RETAINED HIS FORMAL POSITION, IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT FOR HIM TO GET THE POLITBURO TO ACCEPT ANY WIELDING OF HIS POWERS BY A FAVORED SUBORDINATE (E.G., KIRILENKO). THUS, THE IMMORTALITY OPTION, PERHAPS THE EASIEST AND MOST NATURAL ONE FOR BREZHNEV TO CHOOSE, WOULD PROBABLY ALSO BE THE ONE LEAST LIKELY TO ASSURE HIM A PLACE IN THE HISTORY BOOKS.

B. SECOND, THE GOLD WATCH OPTION: BREZHNEV GOES INTO HONORABLE RETIREMENT IN FAVOR OF KIRILENKO OR A COLLECTIVITY OF

SENIORS. THIS WOULD BE THE MOST LIKELY OPTION IF BREZHNEV FELT HE WERE SERIOUSLY ILL AND WANTED HIS DEPARTURE TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY A MINIMUM OF INTERNAL TURMOIL. ASSUMING BREZHNEV'S POOR HEALTH PREVENTED HIM FROM GROOMING A SUCCESSOR OF A YOUNGER GENERATION (SEE OPTION THREE), HE MIGHT FEEL THAT HIS BEST CHANCE FOR A PASSPORT TO THE PANTHEON LAY IN PASSING THE MANTLE VOLUNTARILY TO KIRILENKO OR, A LESS APPEALING ALTERNATIVE, TO SOME COMBINATION OF THE FOUR SENIOR LEADERS (KIRILENKO, PODGORNYY, KOSYGIN, AND SUSLOV). THE EAST EUROPEAN PARALLELS (E.G., ULBRICHT) ARE NOT TOO AUSPICIOUS, BUT IN CIRCUMSTANCES OF GRAVE ILLNESS BREZHNEV MIGHT SEE THIS AS HIS ONLY CHOICE. IT WOULD AT LEAST HAVE THE ADVANTAGE OF GIVING A FAVORITE LIKE KIRILENKO A CLEARER MANDATE TO WHEEL AND DEAL THAN HE WOULD HAVE IF BREZHNEV HELD ONTO THE TRAPPINGS OF OFFICE AND POWER.

C. THIRD, THE OLYMPIAN OPTION: BREZHNEV RESTRICTS HIS FUNCTIONS AND CONCENTRATES ON BIG DECISIONS AND ON PREPARING THE WAY FOR A YOUNGER SUCCESSOR WHO WOULD CARRY ON THIS NAME AND CONFIDENTIAL

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HIS POLICIES AFTER THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS. THIS OPTION WOULD GIVE BREZHNEV THE BEST CHANCE OF REAL IMMORTALITY, BUT HE WOULD HAVE TO BE ABLE TO EMPLOY HIS FULL POLITICAL SKILLS IN ORDER TO BRING IT OFF. A POSSIBLE SCENARIO WOULD BE FOR BREZHNEV -- PERHAPS AFTER A TRIUMPHAL U.S. SUMMIT -- TO GIVE UP HIS QUASI-GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTIONS AND HIS GLOBE-TROTTING AND DEVOTE HIMSELF TO MAKING ONLY THE BIGGEST INTERNAL DECISIONS, TO PARTY WORK, TO ORGANIZING THE 25TH CONGRESS, AND TO MANEUVERING A YOUNGER ASSOCIATE (E.G., KULAKOV OR SCHERBITSKIY) INTO POSITION BE BE ELECTED THE NEXT GENERAL SECRETARY. THE OLYMPIAN OPTION HAS THE ADVANTAGE OF ALLOWING BREZHNEV TO CHANNEL HIS REMAINING POWERS INTO THE SUCCESSION QUESTION. IT HAS THE DISADVANTAGE OF MAKING BREZHNEV LOOK LIKE A LAME DUCK, AND LAME DUCKS ARE NOTORIOUSLY LACKING IN THE POWER THEY WOULD HAVE IF THEIR POLITICAL DEMISE WERE NOT INCIPIENT. THE OLYMPIAN OPTION ALSO RISKS INCURRING THE OPPOSITION OF SOME OF THE SENIOR LEADERS, WHO WOULD PROBABLY FEEL THREATENED BY THE RAPID RISE OF A YOUNGER MAN. TO WORK THIS OPTION SUCCESSFULLY, BREZHNEV PROBABLY WOULD HAVE TO KEEP SIGNALLING SOMEHOW THAT HE MAY NOT STEP DOWN AT THE NEXT CONGRESS, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME GROOMING SOMEBODY ELSE TO TAKE OVER. IF HE WERE TITO, HIS CHANCES TO CARRY IT OFF WOULD PROBABLY BE FAVORABLE; BUT HIS PERSONAL PRESTIGE AND POWER ARE NOT THE EQUIVALENT OF THE YUGOSLAV LEADER'S. THUS, HERE TOO THE ODDS ARE NOT VERY GOOD FOR BREZHNEV.

7. BREZHNEV'S ILLNESS -- DEPENDING ON HOW DEBILITATING IT IS -- MAY SHARPLY REDUCE HIS ABILITY TO MANIPULATE ANY OF THESE OPTIONS. ON THE PRINCIPLE THAT BLOOD IN THE WATER ATTRACTS SHARKS, HIS POOR HEALTH IS AT THE LEAST LIKELY TO INTENSIFY THE PROCESS OF LEADERSHIP SPARRING WHICH WOULD BE NATURAL ANYWAY IN A PRE-CONGRESS YEAR. AS WE NOTED IN REFTEL, THE STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL POWER IS USUALLY CLOTHED IN ISSUES; BUT WE HAVE

SEEN NO CLEAR EVIDENCE OF LEADERSHIP DISPUTES OVER PARTICULAR ISSUES. THE RODIONOV ARTICLE IN PRAVDA JANUARY 21, WHICH SO FAR IS SUI GENERIS, DID IMPLY SOME DISSATISFACTION WITH THE INABILITY OF THE PRESENT POLITBURO TO REACH DECISIONS ON KEY ECONOMIC ISSUES, BUT WAS NOT SPECIFICALLY CRITICAL OF BREZHNEV PERSONALLY. RODIONOV -- A MAN WHO LOST HIS POST OF SECOND SECRETARY OF GEORGIA UNDER THE BREZHNEV LEADERSHIP -- HOWEVER, DID WARN AGAINST THE TENDENCY OF PARTY LEADERS TO ASSUME ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS, A POLICY ASSOCIATED WITH BREZHNEV. HE ALSO  
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MENTIONED THE PERENNIAL PROBLEM OF THE ADVANCEMENT OF YOUNGER LEADERS TO SENIOR POSTS. AS USUAL, HIS WORDS ON THIS SENSITIVE SUBJECT WERE CAREFULLY MODULATED WITH RECOGNITION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENCED CADRES; BUT SIMPLY TO MENTION THE ISSUE IS TO REMIND MIDDLE-ECHELON LEADERS OF THE OBSTACLES TO PROMOTION --THE SENIOR INCUMBENTS. MOREOVER, HIS EMPHASIS ON THE PRINCIPLE OF COLLECTIVITY, THOUGH A FAMILIAR THEME FOR HIM, MAY ALSO CARRY THE IMPLICATION THAT COLLECTIVITY IS INSUFFICIENTLY REGARDED BY BREZHNEV; THIS, OF COURSE, WAS THE CHARGE AGAINST KHRUSHCHEV AND PROBABLY THE STRONGEST REASON FOR HIS OVERTHROW. NEVERTHELESS, RODIONOV'S MESSAGE IS NOT NEW AND HIS MESSAGE IS BASICALLY THE NEGATIVE ONE OF CHAFING OVER LEADERSHIP INDECISION.

8. WE CONTINUE TO FEEL THAT WHILE IT IS LIKELY THAT PRIORITIES FOR RESOURCE ALLOCATIONS WOULD FORM THE TERRAIN ON WHICH A POSSIBLE STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL POWER WOULD BE WAGED, IT ALSO SEEMS PROBABLE THAT THE ECONOMIC ISSUES WOULD BE PRIMARILY INTERNAL ONES (E.G., LIGHT-VS. - HEAVY INDUSTRY, DEFENSE SPENDING, REORGANIZATION OF AGRICULTURE) RATHER THAN ONES DIRECTLY INVOLVING SOVIET ECONOMIC TIES WITH THE WEST. DISAPPOINTMENT WITH BREZHNEV'S ECONOMIC DETENTE POLICIES COULD PLAY A SECONDARY ROLE IN A POWER STRUGGLE, BUT WE DOUBT THAT EVEN THE SETBACK ON TRADE WITH THE U.S. IS SEEN HERE AS SO SERIOUS OR SO IRREVERSIBLE AS TO MAKE ECONOMIC DETENTE A MAJOR BONE OF CONTENTION. THUS, OUR WORKING HYPOTHESIS AT THIS POINT REMAINS THAT SOVIET INTEREST IN CLOSER ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH THE WEST IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE DURING PRE-PART CONGRESS JOCKING.

9. AS REGARDS POLITICAL DETENTE, AN ACTIVE BREZHNEV, COUNTING HIS DAYS, WOULD CERTAINLY WANT TO KEEP THINGS ON COURSE. THE PROSPECTS FOR SALT II AND CSCE ARE BRIGHT ENOUGH TO MAKE THIS LOOK POSSIBLE. SALT PROBABLY HAS A SPECIAL IMPORTANCE FOR BREZHNEV. HOWEVER, WHATEVER LEVERAGE THE U.S. MIGHT BE ABLE TO DERIVE FROM HIS DESIRE FOR AN AGREEMENT MAY BE OFFSET BY HIS WANING ABILITY TO KNOCK HEADS TOGETHER IN THE SOVIET BUREAUCRACY. A BREZHNEV WHO, FOR HEALTH OR OTHER REASONS, IS REGARDED BY HIS COLLEAGUES AS A LAME DUCK WILL NOT BE ABLE TO AFFORD TO MAKE INTERNAL ENEMIES WITH A SOFT AGREEMENT ON STRATEGIC ARMS. EVEN IF A MORE PURELY COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP IS THE NEAR-TERM CONSEQUENCE OF A SERIOUS BREZHNEV ILLNESS, WE WOULD EXPECT A STRONG EFFORT TO BRING SALT AND CSCE TO SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSIONS

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DURING THE YEAR. THE REGIME IS TOO FAR DOWN THE ROAD ON BOTH ISSUES FOR STARTLING POLICY REVERSALS TO BE LIKELY. THE MIDDLE EAST ISSUE HAS A MORE NEGATIVE CAST; THE OVER-RIDING OBJECTIVE (FOR THE REGIME IN GENERAL NO LESS THAN FOR BREZHNEV PERSONALLY) IS TO ENHANCE SOVIET POWER AND PRESTIGE IN THE AREA, WHICH MEANS IN THE SHORT TERM TO AVOID EMBARRASSMENT BY THE U.S. OR EGYPT.

10. LOOKING AT THE FACTORS CURRENTLY BEFORE US IN THEIR TOTALITY -- BREZHNEV'S UNCERTAIN HEALTH, THE HEAVY FOREIGN POLICY CALENDAR TO WHICH THE SOVIETS ARE ALREADY COMMITTED, THE SUCCESSION OPTIONS OPEN TO BREZHNEV, THE NEED TO GET PREPARATIONS FOR THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS SETTLED WITHIN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS --WE WOULD ADVANCE TWO TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS OF RELEVANCE TO U.S.- SOVIET RELATIONS. FIRST, DURING 1975 THE SOVIETS ARE NOT LIKELY TO UNDO THEIR COMMITMENT TO EITHER THE ECONOMIC OR THE POLITICAL-MILITARY ASPECTS OF DETENTE. BUT SECOND --

WHETHER BECAUSE OF A LEADER NO LONGER ABLE TO LEAD, A GREATER COLLECTIVITY IN THE LEADERSHIP, OR A FLOW OF POWER TOWARD ANOTHER LEADER -- THEIR COMMITMENT MAY GROW PROGRESSIVELY MORE FLACCID. THE DANGERS IN OUR VIEW ARE THAT THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP MAY BECOME LESS DETERMINED AND LESS ENERGETIC IN ITS PURSUIT OF IMPROVED U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS AND THUS PROGRESSIVELY LESS CAPABLE OF MAKING SOME OF THE HARD DECISIONS THAT MAY BE REQUIRED TO KEEP THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP MOVING FORWARD.  
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